Romain Rolland

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I.

IN Clamecy, a quiet town in Nivernais in Central France, Romain Rolland was born in 1866. His family had dwelt for centuries in the little place, both as country folk and townspeople. Quite contrary to the inference one would draw from *Jean Christophe,* neither German nor other foreign ancestry is discoverable in the family lineage; Rolland is descended from pure French Catholic burgher stock. His parents devoted themselves with loving zeal to his education; his mother endowing him with a musical sense and love of music that made music, from earliest childhood, his passion and joy; his father, a notary in Clamecy, gave up his profession that he might accompany his young son to Paris.

It is not the external events of his life, but the spiritual atmosphere and environment of his native town, that Rolland depicted in the sixth part of *Jean Christophe,* under the sub-title, "Antoinette." The landscape of Nivernais is a mingling of rivers and canals, great forests and Mont de Moran's peaks. The region unites memorials of the Keltic and Gallic-Roman times and cathedrals of the Gothic period, stimulating the historical sense which, next to the sense of music, is most characteristic of Romain Rolland.

He entered the *Ecole Normale superieure* in Paris, when about fifteen or sixteen years of age, and later went to the *Academia di Francia* in Rome. He considers the friendship formed there with Malvida von Meysenburg* profoundly significant in his development. As she was a faithful friend of Mazzini and Herzen, of Wagner and Nietzsche, in middle age, so in her old age she was the friend of Romain Rolland. "Her memory is sacred to me," he recently wrote, and he had continued in regular correspondence with her from 1890 until her death in 1903.

Rome exercised a profound influence upon his entire spiritual life. He spent there the years 1889 and 1890, and has since made frequent visits for longer or shorter periods. Italy is the country which, next to France, he knows best and loves most. Germany, on the other hand, which he has

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*See my article in *Verk och Människor,* in which I endeavored to show my countrymen the value to them of *Memoiren einer Idealisten.*

***Histoire de l'Opera en Europe, avant Lully et Scarlatti,* (Les origines du theatre lyrique modern), and also *Les causes de la decadence de la peinture italienne.*

described in *Jean Christophe* so vividly that one is convinced he must have passed a great part of his life there, he knows only through some minor journeys.

In 1895, he received his doctor's degree at the University of Paris, and presented two theses.** He was, first, instructor in the History of Art at the school he had attended; later he became professor of History of Music at the Sorbonne, a position he will probably resign; partly, because an automobile accident injured his arm so that he can no longer illustrate his lectures on the History of Music with the piano; partly, because he has found the combination of authorship and lectures too great a strain upon his delicate health.

Concerning the literary impressions that were decisive in his development, he says that his education, like that of most young Frenchmen, was founded upon the classics of the seventeenth century. He found his way, himself, to the writers who gave him spiritual sustenance: Shakespeare, Goethe, and the Encyclopedists, especially Diderot.

In 1886, along with his school comrades, he became acquainted with Tolstoy. In his book on Tolstoy, Rolland says, "He was the purest light that illumined our youth, the cheering star in the twilight of the end of the century—our only real friend in contemporary European art." It was Tolstoy's intoxicating adoration of life that enraptured the young Frenchmen as well as the young Northerners. It was the realism in Tolstoy's art that "opened the portals to life"; it was the mysticism in Tolstoy's nature that opened their ears to "the music of the soul for which they longed" . . . "Tolstoy was to our generation what Werther was to the youth of the eighteenth century."

"But," wrote Rolland in a letter, "the most potent influence in my life was and continues to be—music. It has been an ever-flowing spring, not only for my emotional life, but also for the interpretation of life. For, to him who can rightly listen, music is a language that can interpret the subtlest emotions of the soul, and reveal manifold secrets which literature has never been able to express. If in any degree I understand the German soul, it is due to music."

Romain Rolland is familiar, alike, with the old German masters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and with those of most recent times. *Jean Christophe,* the world's greatest novel concerning a musician and music, is therefore written by a thoroughly-trained connoisseur and practitioner of music; a man who demonstrates that, for his own and for his hero's individual culture, music is the most profound determining influence.

Even though Romain Rolland differs from Tolstoy in questions pertaining to his conception of music, still it is in Tolstoy's spirit that he glorifies in this form of art its universal breadth, its power—beyond national boundaries and personal limitations—to unite mankind in and through the joy of beauty, which is one of the highest conditions of the soul.

One aspect of Romain Rolland's literary work is a direct expression of his profound belief in the ethical mission of art. He participated ardently in the movement, instituted at the close of the last century, that purposed to educate the workingman by means of elevated amusements, especially plays. But Rolland did not, like Tolstoy, seek to awaken love of mankind; he wanted to strengthen power of action and heroism. Rolland has recently published the second edition of a book in which he has collected his controversial articles, written at the time when he and a group of friends hoped to create a new theatre for the awakening people, and thus contribute to the encouragement of that energy of action necessary to the solution of the great problems the time presents.

Pleasure, enlightenment, energy, says Rolland, are what the theatre should furnish the people. Neither the classic drama, which bores the workingman to death by presenting to him *les parties mortes de l'ame,* nor the present drama, which injures or lowers him by setting him in a fever of sordid passions, is fit for a people's theatre. It must furnish the best drama of the present time, the spectacle in which the serious aspect of the time is reflected, or scenes from those earlier phases in which the spirit of struggle and of devotion lived; in other words, it must furnish a virile and wholesome art.

The heroes of the French Revolution were Rolland's inspiration for the drama, and he utilized the struggles of the time of the Revolution for spectacles and folk festivals. At that time he wrote and produced for the people's theatre: *Le 14 Juillet, Danton, Les Loups, Le triomphe de la raison.* The last he has recently published, together with two other early dramas, *St. Louis* and *Aërt.* They are all, as he himself says, devoted to religious enthusiasm; for God, for country, for reason.

He wished to set these pictures of struggling devotion against the cowardice of thought and cowardice of will that he saw everywhere around him. He voiced his own sentiment and that of his young kindred spirits in the words of one of his heroes, who was condemned to death:

"Life will be what I will. I have anticipated victory, but I shall be victorious." And in the words of another:

"You are always thinking of what you can keep or lose. Only think of what you can give. Live; be like the water that flows . . . The world would not exist without that happiness of beings, of flowers in the sun, that joy of giving one's life to the point of exhaustion—which is also a joy of dying continually!"

"It is elder brother to Jean Christophe," Rolland says, "less robust but not less faithful," who uttered these words, which comprise Rolland's creed in its most succint formula.

To revive the energy of action of the French Revolution in order to continue thus the work interrupted in 1794; to set in motion the great passions, not for the purpose of arousing chauvinistic or revolutionary

fanaticism, but in order to kindle anew the universal feeling of solidarity—this was the hope of Rolland and his friends for the future of France.

"This hope," he says, "was one of the purest and holiest forces in our young lives." Rolland, therefore, calls his *Théâtre du peuple* a document of the time, because it "reflects the artistic ideas and hopes of a whole generation."

He gives voice now (1913) to that proud utterance: "Let the future judge us even should it prove that it was our crime to have believed too much in the future."

That this little group has not yet been victorious, we know. Romain Rolland indicated the reason when he said: "In order to fashion a theatre for the people, we must *first have a people;* a people with a *freedom of the soul* able to enjoy art; a people with *leisure;* a people not oppressed by misery or incessant toil; a people not brutalized by every superstition and fanaticism from right and left; a people lord over itself and victor in the battle fought out from day to day."

To these utterances of 1903 can be added one of this year, in which Rolland expressed himself most fervently and with comprehension in regard to the working class of *women*—and in that connection in regard to the whole woman question.* It was made evident, then, that the idealist Rolland is no advocate of the chauvanistic-religious reaction. His idealism is of the whirl of revolutionary times and the future.

His critique upon the classic French literature, his "Teutonism" in *Jean Christophe,* his political and religious radicalism, have made him as obnoxious to nationalistic-Catholic France as Mme. de Stael once was because of her *De l'Allemagne.* Among other evidences of Rolland's status in his own country is the circumstance that when the French Academy recently awarded its new prize of 10,000 francs, it was given, through the influence of Maurice Barrès, to a wholly new man in French literature: André Lafon du Blaye, instructor in a Catholic private school, who had written a book about a school boy, a book which was found to possess that "elevated character" the awarding of the prize demanded! *Jean Christophe* had just been finished! It is, however, not merely in academic circles that Romain Rolland is denied recognition. He has succeeded in getting himself well hated in many another circle because of the cutting truths in *Jean Christophe,* directed against all factions. In *Ord och Bild,* 1912, George Brandes has given a brief but excellent characterization of Rolland's spiritual and intellectual endowments and of his limitations.

Without doubt Rolland's spiritual tendency in youth was determined not only by Tolstoy but also by Guyau; the more because Tolstoy has Guyau to thank for whatever of reason is found in his theories of art.

In regard to the influence of Guyau upon Tolstoy and Nietzsche, see,

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*In a preface to *Celles qui travaillent,* a work of the notable and sincere French authoress, Simone Bodève.

for example, Professor Albert Nilson's excellent essay upon *Guyau's Aesthetics.*

In the mind of Rolland as well as of Guyau, the ethical ideal is the highest intensive quality of life, the most effective energy. Rolland is far from the Christian ascetcism that diluted the wine of Tolstoy. But along with Tolstoy, with Guyau, with Nietzsche, he demands an art that possesses life's consummate vigor; that is itself the richest life, the highest intensity of power. In other words: the ethical ideal and the aesthetic are at heart the same thing; the fundamental principle of art and religion is solidarity; the sense of beauty is at the same time the most intensive and the most expansive of feelings, and so—like the love of humanity—the great fraternizing power. "They who love most create most richly," and "the work that reveals to us the life of greatest value is the noblest": these propositions permeated Rolland just as they did Guyau and Tolstoy, although Rolland establishes a basis of valuation quite different from that of the latter. Perhaps Bergson, too, has in some respects confirmed Rolland's personal view of life. But as Rolland's view was enunciated before Bergson began to write, the influence could have been only to strengthen, not to determine it. No idea harmonized better with Rolland's own innermost being than that respecting the power of the spirit to make a way for creative, unfathomable, inexhaustible life. *Jean Christophe,* from the first chapter to the last, is an illustration of this explosive power, this *élan vital.*

Schiller's words come to mind: Der Dichter ist der einzige wahre *Mensch* und der beste Philosoph ist nur eine Karikatur gegen ihn.* The poet is the only real *Man* and the best philosopher is only a caricature beside him.

Not only with his dramas of the Revolution did Romain Rolland endeavor to make his countrymen hero-worshippers; he also began a series of popular biographies aimed to present, not the great man's work, but the personal powers and experiences that found expression in his work. He says in the preface: "Europe is poisoned with materialism and egotism; we must throw open the windows to get air: *Respirons le souffle des heros. Let us breathe the breath of heroes.*" He rejoices that he too has witnessed contemporary heroic deeds: the defense of the Boers and the vindication of Dreyfus. But he knows that it is "easier to kindle enthusiasm by heroes of the past," heroes "who were great in heart."

His hero-worship did not lead him, however, to glorification at the expense of truth. He utters the thought, profoundly true and all too little understood, that every lack of harmony between life and its laws depends—even in great spirits—not upon their greatness, but upon their weaknesses. "But these weaknesses render them not less worthy of our love . . . The idealism that will not recognize the truth is cowardice; there is only one heroism in the world: *to see the world as it is—and to love it.*"

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*In a letter to Goethe, 1795, after reading *Wilhelm Meister.*

So without hesitation, Rolland points out weaknesses in Michael Angelo's life, and inconsistencies in Tolstoy's. He sees in both great specimens of the "type that will pass away"; the Christian—those who "have had their refuge in God and the everlasting life when this life has gone against them; those whose faith has often been expression for deficient belief in life, in the future, in themselves; a lack of courage and a lack of gladness." "I know," he continues, "of how many defeats your grievous victories are made, and therefore I pity you and admire you. You make the world more doleful but more beautiful. Praised be pain and praised be joy! Both are holy; they form the world and they broaden great souls: joy and pain are powers, are life, are God."*

The three biographies that Rolland has thus far published are of Beethoven, Michael Angelo, and Tolstoy. In the first, it is the love of life and the courage of life; in the second, creative power and strength of belief; in the third, the ecstacy of life and the love of mankind, that he emphasizes. Such souls, he says, restore to us belief in life and in mankind, for from them "issues a current of social power and potent goodness."

II.

Beethoven is Rolland's own conception of life, and is nearest his heart. To that "soul of music, heroism, and goodness" Rolland has reared the only memorial worthy of Beethoven that art has created: *Jean Christophe.*

This book was published during the course of nine years. But long before it began to appear it had lived in and with its writer for the greater part of his life. In it Rolland has committed to writing his profound conception of the innermost being of a musical genius, and has done it in such a manner that one is firmly convinced of the truth of the revelations that one follows from the cradle to the grave. In other novels concerning geniuses the writers assert incessantly that they *are* geniuses; here the genius evinces himself through his being. One does not read a book, one lives a life—and a life of the highest value, the existence that great spirit creates: that of the genius, who out of the flaming chaos of his nature forms a cosmos. An "educational novel," of which the world's literature thus far possesses only one such in *Wilhelm Meister,* and, in a measure, in Keller's *Der Grune Heinrich.* . . . I have lived more intensely with *Jean Christophe* than with most living people.*

World fame is a curious thing. Sometimes it is attained quickly through glorifying friends: a path to fame that often early avenges itself,—that is more dangerous even than the fame that the attacks of enemies furnish. Sometimes fame is won with one blow, by an exceptional work; again

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*Epitome of the introduction to *Michael Angelo.*

*Lack of space forces me to omit Miss Key's interesting but very long analysis of *Jean Christophe.*—The Editor.

it is prepared for in silence and then suddenly rushes forth with the roar of a great torrent formed by many small streams. The last is the case with Romain Rolland.

When I read him in 1909, in Switzerland, I went shortly afterwards to Paris, where, at that time, he was not mentioned among the celebrated writers and where even his friends thought he dare not reckon his circle of readers larger than the ten or fifteen thousand faithful he possessed in the world of French-speaking readers. In Germany his circle was still narrower; in Sweden, he was unknown even by name.

For the new generation the book is a document of the spiritual history of the time. For the serious-minded portion of the French youth, Rolland has possessed an influence comparable with his own description of Tolstoy's influence upon himself and the young generation with him. Youth has learned from him that the fleeting fashionable attitude toward the great souls or ideas that Paris shapes is sterile; that it is only by devotion that a spiritual growth can be attained; that skepticism in the face of all greatness is poverty, but admiration and love "is the way, to the most potent, the richest, life." Youth has found in him contempt for mere fine phrases, for declamation, and received from him Goethe's conception of creation: "In the beginning was action." They have heard him proclaim *that* nationalism that is loyalty to the best in the essence of the French nation: love of truth and justice, desire for freedom and fraternity, devotion to its ideal values and above all the dream of happiness for all mankind. This dream that among us Teutons is content to sleep, is among Frenchmen an ever restless disturbance of the blood. And it is only by occasionally letting his blood flow for these dreams that he feels he is living up to his highest ideals. *This* Youth for whom each new part of *Jean Christophe* has been a great event, despises with Rolland the estheticism that turns from life. This youth has learned to distinguish between great art and the work of those who think they are creating art but are only making arts. But above all, at a time of reaction toward the Christian "faith"—a reaction that has been justified by the fact that science has not been able to "explain" life nor "vindicate" it—they receive a new fountain of living water. Rolland has attempted neither to explain life nor defend it. The leit-motiv of his great symphonic work is Beethoven's thought: "Durch Leiden Freude,"—"Through suffering joy comes." We can, so he says, neither understand life in all its plenitude of contradictions nor ennoble it in all its brutality in any way other than by *living* it one's self in the fullest and highest meaning of the word. Music, the all-unifying art, love, the all-embracing condition of the soul, are the two highest attitudes of devotion to God, who is life.

More Rolland knows not. And more than he knows the veracious man does not say.

> "I cannot," he writes, "give any metaphysical credo. For, in the first place, I will never deceive myself by saying *I know*

that which I do not know—which, at the most, I can imagine or hope. In the second place, I will never confine myself within the limits of any belief. For I hope to develop until my last day; I wish to reserve for myself unlimited freedom of intellectual transformation and renewal. I have many gods in my Pantheon; but my chief godhead is *Liberty*. At present I do not separate the essence of the human soul from that of the divine spirit, of which the former is a part. But I hardly believe that this divine spirit fills the universe. It *seeks*, certainly, to fill the world and guide it; but nothing indicates that it will succeed. Even in this regard I reserve space for liberty. Pure monism does not satisfy me. I am more inclined to a dualism such as the ancient Empedocles believed in. I have an unbounded admiration for the pre-Socratic philosophers, the sages of Ionia and Magna Graecia. Indeed my first work, written at Rome, twenty years ago, was a drama with Empedocles as hero. The struggle between two principles is manifest to me in the whole history of the world, material as well as moral history. The question is whether there is not a *third* principle, in which the other two are included or harmonized. A trinity therefore—it is singular how this form forces itself upon the human mind—but a trinity very different from the Christian conception of the trinity, since it comprises a father and two striving brothers: a triad that approaches the antique cosmogony of which we find a reflection in Hesiod, in *Chaos*, *Gaea*, and *Eros*. If I live I shall go deeper into ancient thought. Those ancient philosophers lived in more intimate contact with nature than any of their successors, and, moreover, collected the thousand-year-old wisdom of the whole Orient."

Besides this personal utterance of Rolland himself, a French friend of his, intimate with his thought, has given me permission to communicate the following statement of the trend of Rolland's thought:

The liberty of his mind, his lucidity, his keen penetration, render him incapable of accepting the least dogma or the least constraint. It is impossible to conceive of anything that could have upon such a mind, not to say a direct hold, but even an appreciable influence. That mind is alone, magnificently alone, as independent as if the world were just born. Moreover, he is quite as far from all revealed religions as from all systems. He would in no wise admit that the Christian or any other religion is more closely related to the past, and Darwinism or any scientism whatever more to the future. He would see, in these diverse ways of viewing life, forms of the human mind which return at periodic intervals and of which one no more than the other is an absolute progress in which he does not believe. Only by his very nature, he is antimaterialistic. He believes in the duality of soul and body in an absolute, organic manner. He hopes sincerely to quit this body and go to live a larger and fuller life. No personal immortality! He cannot endure the thought. That would be the continuation of this captivity in a limited personality, which to him appears stifling. He feels that he is also going to live in God, not understanding by that word

> any anthropomorphic god, but a fountain of universal life. He loves to plunge, through time and space, into a meditation in which he totally forgets his personality, and wherein he finds a sort of intoxication. He has uttered this admirable and terrible sentence: "Sometimes I feel *no difference* between my friends absent or present, living or dead." To ask such a being if he is of the past or of the future would have no significance; he is beyond the compass of time.

I have met Rolland only through letters. But some words concerning his personality, as it had affected another poet, I can communicate here in conclusion:

"The confident grasp replete with experience, the modest ripeness . . in his being; the benignity, the unprecedented purity in all his purpose . . are beneficent . . . Everything is genuine, developed with will and consciousness: a man who has improved steadily . . . From him emanates a gentle plenitude, consummate in action, like that of a star at twilight."

When world renown comes to such a man, it has not much to say to him. Rolland meets it with an averted glance in his far-seeing luminous eyes, eyes which quietly and steadily look towards new works and new horizons.

From all corners of the world he hears: that he has given to the time the book most brimming with the whole seething life of the time; that he has given men the book most permeated with the essence of music and Orphean effects; that he has created an entire human race, a race in which all ages of life and degrees of development, in which women as well as men are equally convincing in truth to life; that he has given a work overflowing with ideas, with philosophy of life, with vital help, by exhibiting a great human life in all its weakness and in all its strength. And assuredly this will give him joy.

But he will feel proud only when the word comes that his French heart longs to hear: The people that has given to the world such a work is not, as its enemies say, going to destruction. That nation is ever potent with the energy of life.

Rolland's great book is not merely a glorious revelation of the fact that all the greatest ideas that France has given the world live ever in the French people. It demonstrates also that mankind needs the French spirit always in order to realize them.